

Dr Ian Wellard is a Reader in the Sociology of Sport and Physical Education and Associate Director of the Centre for Sport, Physical Education and Activity Research (SPEAR) at Canterbury Christ Church University. For correspondence, email: ian.wellard@canterbury.ac.uk

Ian Wellard

Girls and Physical Activities: an update

In 2005, a review of research exploring girls' participation in sport and physical activities was published in this journal (Bailey, Wellard & Dismore 2005). The review was a summary of a larger report for the World Health Organisation (WHO) which was an attempt to provide an overview of current research within the field and, at the same time, suggest possible ways in which girls could be encouraged and/or allowed to take a more active role in sport and physical activity.

The findings in this report were not necessarily remarkable for many of those professionals who deal with children's health and sport issues on a day to day basis, chiefly that the majority of young girls do in fact like sport and physical activities and would like to do more. However, what became more apparent was the way that girls were (and continue to be) excluded for a variety of often complex and competing factors. These included, among others, the influence of the family, friends and physical education teachers, social perceptions of sport as well as practical issues such as independent mobility.

Consequently, we were able to provide a series of recommendations which promoted ways in which the various interested agencies, such as governments, schools, sports groups and communities, could be more sensitive to girls' needs and interests. Much of this thinking was based on formulating ways in which activities could be made more 'youth friendly' in the broader sense of the term where the specific needs of children and young people could

be addressed rather than maintaining simplistic gendered binaries.

What follows is a discussion of what has happened since writing the report along with a consideration of recent developments which may have affected the ways in which gender is (still?) considered an issue for concern.

What has happened since?

Exploring the current research and compiling the report was particularly influential in developing my own thinking about the multiple factors which shape participation in sport and physical activity. An immediate priority after completing the report was to explore further the complexities of understanding gender within the context of youth sport. In *Rethinking Gender and Youth Sport* (Wellard 2007) a group of academics from a range of disciplines contributed to the discussion by exploring gender in relation to broader theoretical issues such as bodies, space, policy and wellbeing. In doing so, the intention was to contemplate the fruitfulness of considering gender on its own, or as a factor read through children's bodies or children's physical activity.

For example, Gordon Waitt (2007) explored the theme of occupation or ownership of social space, in particular the significance of physical space as it is historically and socially constructed as gendered. Waitt does this by focusing upon spaces 'outside' the school or organised sport by using the example of surfing spaces in Australia. These spaces originally

emerged as significant cultural spaces for young people away from regulated, structured sports. However, within these physical and social spaces, specific gendered identities are established and performed. Waitt's research highlights the ways in which gendered identities are shaped through and by local spaces as well as the physical activity.

In another example, Angela Pickard (2007) used empirical research with young female ballet dancers to highlight the prevalence of pain and the socially constructed techniques employed by the dancers to negotiate and hide it from the audience. For Pickard, whilst the body is a central factor in the construction of identities, at a social level of understanding the ballet body is constructed in a binary opposition to a (male) sporting body. However, like men who play sport, negotiating pain increasingly becomes a central focus in the dancers' everyday lives, although the ways the young dancers do this provides sharp contrast to, for example, male boxers or rugby players. Pickard's research, therefore, provides the opportunity to critically assess general assumptions about gender and active participation in physical activities.

Focus on the body has remained significant in my subsequent research and is the central theme throughout *Sport, Masculinities and the Body* (Wellard 2009) where I argue that the male sporting body needs to be understood as a gendered performance read alongside other competing factors such as ability, age, class and sexuality.

Competing discourses

It could be claimed that the momentum generated in the research mentioned above and elsewhere has equally been sidetracked by other competing discourses. In particular those relating to what Connell (2008) describes as the recent 'boys as victims discourse' as well as the recent obsession

with childhood obesity. According to Connell (2008), contemporary educational thinking about boys' academic underachievement has reproduced a drastically simplified view of men, boys and masculinity. These simplistic readings of masculinity have been constructed in opposition to femininity and, as a result, re-emphasised hegemonic forms of masculine performance and the belief 'that only men can truly understand masculinity. Men have it, and women do not' (Connell 2008: 132). Consequently, sport has been a particular focus as it is considered an area where men 'naturally' excel, along with the perception that only 'real' men appreciate the importance of sport, and the associated elements of it, such as fighting and competition.

The 'boys as victims' discourse has also been fuelled by much of recent Government policy in England aimed at the welfare of children which has, in turn, been prompted by a broader focus upon a 'children as victims' discourse, as a reaction to high profile cases of apparent failings in Children's Services to protect vulnerable children (Powell and Wellard 2008). By concentrating upon this aspect of children's wellbeing, recent policy in England affecting children (such as, Every Child Matters 2004, The Children's Plan 2007) has consequently adopted measures which, intentionally or not, construct children as potentially at risk from a range of threats. On the one hand, this interpretation of children's wellbeing can be viewed as a positive step towards protecting vulnerable groups, while on the other hand, can equally restrict outlets for children to experience and learn about the wider world for themselves.

These conflicting understandings of what is 'good' for children have had direct impact upon the ways in which children are able to experience their bodies and explore spaces. Particularly within the context of sport and physical activity, the messages about the positive effects, are generally described

within the context of physical health and the prevention of disease in later life. For example, The Children's Plan (2007) specifically identified the importance of introducing measures to address health and wellbeing, such as:

- Enhance children and young people's wellbeing, particularly at key transition points in their lives;
- Child health improved, with proportion of obese and overweight children reduced to 2000 levels.
(The Children's Plan 2007)

Consequently, much of the recent debate about children's wellbeing has been expressed in terms of 'health' and potential risk of obesity. Although well intentioned, there is the risk that continued focus upon specific outcomes has assigned many other equally important aspects of a young person's development to the sidelines and has possibly impeded the quest for overall wellbeing that it proposed as a main objective. It could also be argued that indirectly, the alignment of physical activity to addressing children's health, along with recent suggestions linking creativity with the mind, has further reinforced the notion of separate spheres in childhood development. As a result, it could be argued that there has been an oversight (or failure) in understanding the interplay and connectedness of physical, social and psychological ways that individuals develop an orientation towards a physical activity and, indeed, their own embodied identity.

Recent research into children's participation in sport and physical activity

Of the recommendations suggested in the 2004 WHO report, it is notable that several themes have been recurring in more recent research and, importantly, indicates aspects of children's lives which need to be acknowledged more fully.

Pleasure

One suggestion was that 'practices should be established which recognise the importance of fun, health and social interaction in sports participation' (2005, pg 4). In a forthcoming paper, *Body Reflexive Pleasures: exploring bodily experiences within the context of sport and physical activity* (Wellard, in press), I explore the importance of acknowledging pleasure in sport as more than just an intrinsic, subjective, highly individual experience. These ideas have been developed in the research exploring the body and sport mentioned above (Wellard 2007, 2009) where themes relating to bodily pleasure, fun and enjoyment as a factor in sporting participation constantly appeared in the narratives of the conversations with interviewees (young and old). In the paper, the relevance of pleasure (in its many forms) as experienced through the body is explored in an attempt to generate ideas for further discussion relating to the impact of pleasure upon participation in sport. In particular, the suggestion is that young people need to have a range of experiences of sport in order to be able to make distinctions about what can be considered pleasurable for them. However, it is not about just providing the opportunity to 'have a go' in order to comply with curriculum directives. It is about providing opportunities for young people to experience activities and make assessments about when, where and how an activity is pleasurable.

The important point here is about recognising the influence of pleasure for young people in their initial experiences of sport and subsequent formation of a sporting identity. Although, as adults, we may be aware of the benefits of participating in sport and physical activities, those benefits are not necessarily obvious for children. In particular, there is the risk of complacency amongst PE teachers as it is easy to forget that the activities they teach

need to be experienced positively in the first place - or conditions need to be provided so that they can be experienced positively. It could also be argued that a focus upon outcomes such as tackling obesity or identifying talent will ultimately create a discourse where these values take precedence. Through time, a restricted rhetoric of health, if constantly extolled by the teachers, will further alienate many individuals from their bodies and potential participation during the life-course.

Opportunities

In another recommendation we suggested that, 'the more opportunities that are available for girls to be active, the more they are active' (2005, pg 5). Although this may appear obvious, it is still apparent that girls (and young people in general) do not always have the same opportunities and levels of provision. Participation in sport remains dependent upon a range of arbitrary and competing factors.

During 2010 and 2011, the Centre for Sport, Physical Education and Activity Research (SPEAR) was involved in evaluations of two high profile national interventions aimed at increasing sports participation among young people. These are the Bank of Scotland and LloydsTSB National School Sport Week and the Change 4 Life School Sport Clubs programme (1).

The findings from the research suggest that these large-scale, funded initiatives were generally considered positive experiences and, importantly, the children taking part enjoyed having the opportunity to try new or unusual sports, regardless of whether they said they liked sport to begin with. However, the research also revealed disparities between what adults and children want from such an event and contrasting interpretations of what a school sports week or a specific sports club could offer and how it could be integrated into the schools. In the case of the National School

Sport Week, the research also revealed that primary schools appeared more willing and flexible to incorporate a whole school approach, whereas secondary schools tended to locate the event within a PE dept and focus more upon the competitive aspects. Consequently, the contrasting ways in which these initiatives were embraced within schools highlights that not all schools are sufficiently willing and/or able to deliver quality sports provision in ways which provide novel and creative opportunities for all children.

Young people and physical activities

In a short space of time, the issue of girls' lack of participation in sport and physical activities has, one could argue, slipped from the agenda. As described above, there have emerged a range of discourses about the health and wellbeing of young people and these have shifted the focus from 'girls' to what might be considered as equally important issues relating to young people in general. However, as the findings from the 2004 WHO report suggested, girls' physical activity is mediated by a host of factors, not always specifically gender-related. What we need to be mindful of when attempting to address the wellbeing of young people is to not fall into the trap of creating another 'single' issue focus, such as 'obesity' or 'boys'. Simplistic readings such as these detract from the broader complexities of young people's lives and what adults want from them.

Note

(1) SPEAR was commissioned by the Youth Sport Trust to evaluate the 2010 and 2011 Lloyds TSB National School Sport Week in England and Wales and Bank of Scotland National School Sport Week. These annual events are designed to motivate pupils to do more sport by celebrating and profiling PE achievements in schools, and providing a

platform from which to launch new sport based initiatives. SPEAR was also commissioned by the Youth Sport Trust to evaluate the Department of Health funded Change 4 Life School Sport Clubs programme. This was a scheme introduced in 2010 to encourage young people to take part in after-school sports clubs in one of seven specified sports; boccia, badminton, handball, volleyball, fencing, table tennis and wheelchair basketball. In both cases, SPEAR incorporated a range of methodological strategies which included online surveys with teachers, sports development officers (or equivalent) and school children and school visits where interviews, focus group conversations, drawing activities and observations were conducted. The National School Sport Week research included schools in England, Scotland and Wales, whereas the Change 4 Life School Sport Clubs programme was focused upon English schools only.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bailey, R., Wellard, I. & Dismore, H. (2005) Girls and Physical Activities: A summary review, *Education and Health*, 23 (1): 3-5.

Connell, R.W. (2008) Masculinity construction and sports in boys' education: a framework for thinking about the issue. *Sport, Education and Society*. 13 (2): 131-145.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures*. London: DCFS.

Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Schools*. London: DfES.

Pickard, A. (2007) Girls, bodies and pain: negotiating the body in ballet, in I. Wellard *Rethinking Gender and Youth Sport* (London, Routledge), 36-50.

Powell, S. & Wellard, I. (2008) *Policies and Play: The impact of national policies on children's opportunities for play*. London: Play England and the National Children's Bureau.

Waitt, G. (2007) (Hetero)sexy waves: surfing, space, gender and sexuality, in I. Wellard *Rethinking Gender and Youth Sport* (London, Routledge), 36-50.

Wellard, I. (2007) *Rethinking Gender and Youth Sport*, London: Routledge.

Wellard, I. (2009) *Sport, Masculinities and the Body*, New York: Routledge.

Wellard, I. (in press) Body Reflexive Pleasures: exploring bodily experiences within the context of sport and physical activity, *Sport, Education and Society*. Vol 17 (1).

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Get the perception and performance figures you need from SHEU

Since the establishment of the JSNA in 2008, SHEU have been providing local authorities with vital data about their young people to inform their planning.

The Coalition Government has placed the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment at the heart of its proposals with regard to the future of local health improvement. The SHEU's Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ) is used across the UK in primary and secondary schools and recent comments highlight its value:

"As I am sure you have picked up from other authorities the HRBQ is a fantastic data source for the JSNA which now has such a more significant profile than it has in the past." Lead Adviser Health and Wellbeing

For further details please contact Angela Balding
Tel 01392 667272 [email: angela.balding@sheu.org.uk](mailto:angela.balding@sheu.org.uk)